HOLD TO THE GOOD
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Psalm 148
Hebrews 10:19–25
Ruth 1:1–18

"Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds."
Hebrews 10:24 (NRSV)

Lord, you have created the world and everything in it and called it good.
So help us to know and trust the goodness of your creation;
and give us courage and steadfastness to hold to the good in all we do,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

One of the best parts of this job is the opportunity to stand in a sanctuary on a Saturday afternoon when a man and a woman—sometimes young and idealistic, sometimes not so young and with enough experience to be cautious about idealism—a man and a woman hold hands and, in front of their families and best friends in the world, say,

> I take you to be my wife, and I promise to be your loving husband.
> I take you to be my husband, and I promise to be your loving wife.

That's the idealism part. And then we get to the terms of the contract, the specifics, get down to the nitty-gritty so to speak:

> In plenty and in want;
> in joy and in sorrow;
> in sickness and in health;
> as long as we both shall live.

I never hear those words without thinking about Holly Mitchell. Horace was his real name, but "Holly" described him; small of stature, a gentleman of the old order, with an absolutely cherubic, round face, and one of the kindest, most gracious individuals I have ever known. He was a classic: a salesman who ended up owning the manufacturing company that first hired him out of the University of Michigan, a connection he bore with great grace and patience—in Columbus, Ohio. He always wore his Michigan tie on the Sunday before the Ohio State–Michigan game. The company he worked for fabricated telephone poles, and Holly had sold them all over the

Midwest. He was in his mid-seventies and retired when I met him. In his retirement, he put on a suit and tie every day and went to his old office to read the *Wall Street Journal*, write letters, and then walk across the street for lunch at the University Club, where he occasionally entertained his minister. On one of those occasions early in our relationship, something happened that we both laughed about later. We were sitting at a window table at the University Club when a motorcade pulled up outside, police cars, lights flashing. As we watched, out of one of the cars emerged the unmistakable figure of the Governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter, who was running for president. Holly was a staunch Republican. "I suppose you want to go down and meet him," he said. "From your sermons, I know you like people like him." "Yes sir, I'd love to," I said. So down we went on the elevator and bumped into candidate Carter in the lobby. I shook his hand, wished him well, and then introduced my friend, Mr. Mitchell, standing there unhappily and a little self-consciously in his three-piece gray suit, *Wall Street Journal* tucked under his arm to advertise his opinion of this whole project. They shook hands and on the elevator on the way back to the dining room, Holly said, "Well, I'm glad that's over."

Holly and Ethel were in their pew every Sunday. And then Ethel began to get sick, confused, forgetful. It was the onset of Alzheimer's, a name we were just learning. After a protracted time of increasing disability and difficulty for Ethel, Holly made the painful decision to put her in a long-term care facility.

He visited her every day, spent the afternoon with her and often stayed for dinner. Occasionally I would visit them there because I knew where I could find him. As Ethel's illness progressed, memory evaporated and she stopped recognizing Holly, sometimes simply ignored him, sometimes asked who he was and chatted pleasantly as if he were a stranger. Near the end she was occasionally unkind, harsh, hurtful; one time she asked him to leave her alone. Another time, he told me, she said he'd better leave before her husband came. Still he came every day.

"Why do you do this every day, Holly," I asked once. "She doesn't know who you are. Why do you subject yourself to this every day?"

Holly answered, "Because I said I would. I promised to love her in sickness and in health, as long as we lived. We had lots of health together. This is the sickness part."

There's a story in the Bible like that. It is a literary masterpiece of exquisite beauty. First it is about three married couples; then it is about two women. And finally it is about God and the way God uses the small, seemingly mundane details of human life for God's own purpose.

Elimelech and Naomi, Israelites, Jews—from Bethlehem in fact—pack up during a famine and move across the border to Moab. They thrive there. They have two sons, and those sons marry Moabite young women, Orpah and Ruth. It sounds at this point a little like Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. Orpah and Ruth are different ethnically and racially: foreigners, outsiders. The Jewish family welcomes them.

And then things begin to unravel. Elimelech dies. Then the two sons die. Now we have a Jewish widow in a foreign land, with her two widowed daughters-in-law, who happen to be already living in their own country. A widow in Israel is in trouble. By law, the closest relative of her deceased husband is responsible for her welfare and protection. It's called Leverite marriage. If there is no one, she is in a lot of trouble. There is no one for Naomi, so she decides to go home to Israel, to Bethlehem, and hope for the best.

Orpah and Ruth start out with her. Naomi pleads with them to return to their homes and families, where their prospects will be infinitely better than in the company of a Jewish widow with no hope at all. It is a kind, commonsense decision. Orpah agrees and leaves and returns to her home and family. Ruth, however, refuses. Naomi pleads: go home, do the right thing, take care of yourself.

Ruth's response is pure poetry, read at thousands of weddings although it has nothing to do with marriage per se:

> Where you go, I will go.
> Where you lodge, I will lodge.
> Your people shall be my people.
> Your God shall be my God
> Where you die, I will die.

The rest of the story is equally good. In fact, if the Bears can't get an offense going against St. Louis this afternoon, turn off the TV, or at least hit the mute, find the family Bible, and read Ruth. It's only four pages long. It's near the front of the Old Testament, tucked in between Judges and 1 Samuel where hardly anybody can find it. It's a love story. Naomi and Ruth, widows, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, return to Naomi's home, Bethlehem. Ruth takes care of Naomi by following the field hands during harvest and picking up leftover grain. The owner of the fields, Boaz, sees what is happening and tells his workers to leave plenty behind for Ruth. Ruth tells Naomi about it. Naomi sees something else happening and essentially encourages Ruth to make her move, which she does. "Visit him at night, while he's sleeping. Uncover his feet and lie down," which the scholars tell us is a metaphor for something more intimate and interesting.

Ruth does what she is told, and the rest, as they say, is history. Boaz and Ruth fall in love, marry, and after this inconsequential, very human interlude, the story of God and God's people continues.

The story itself is the point. God uses the modest, mundane details of modest, mundane human lives for great purposes that cannot always be seen at the time, particularly by the people living those modest, mundane lives. The point is that God uses, for redemptive purposes, human goodness, loyalty, steadfastness; God blesses human love when it is selfless and vulnerable, when, in St. Paul's words, "it seeks not its own way." God blesses and uses goodness.

The problem has always been that it is difficult to know what is the good and to do the good in the real world. It's messy and dangerous out there, full of ambiguity. What is the good in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel? What is the good when it comes to the rights of women to make critical decisions about pregnancy and childbearing? It's messy out there, and so it has always been tempting to Christians to turn our backs on the world, essentially to concede that goodness is not all that easy, maybe not even possible, out there in the messy ambiguity of the world, so we'll pursue it in an atmosphere we can control, in a community that thinks the same, a cloistered monastery or convent. It's not too difficult to hold to the good in a monastery, after all.

Besides, the world doesn't seem much interested in the good. Huge American corporations lie to the government, to their own employees and stockholders. Once-respected corporate names disappear in disgrace. Mutual fund managers steal profits. A recovery of the good in corporate America is of the highest priority. And have you been to a movie recently, sat through the previews? American popular culture is obsessed with the bad, the ugly, the violent. *Money* magazine this month observed that the most profitable motion pictures by a wide margin are movies with extreme violence; a close second are movies that combine sex and violence, often at the expense of women.

So yes, the temptation is to shut it out and pursue the good in here, in the comfort and security of this sanctuary, this religious community, to give up on any potential for goodness in the world. The temptation to back away from the world has been almost irresistible from the very beginning. When the first Christians were small minorities, ridiculed, persecuted by the culture around them, it was understandable that they might withdraw, retreat from the world to the security and safety and moral certainties of their own fellowship. But the New Testament itself won't allow it.

The Letter to the Hebrews: Hold fast. . . . Provoke one another to love and good deeds."

1 Thessalonians 5:14: “Always seek to do good to one another and to all.”
1 Corinthians 16:13: “Be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”

The Bible consistently urges us to do the good thing, to hold to the good and to do it in the world, in the public arena with all its messy ambiguity, in the political, social arenas as well as in our relationships, our commitments to one another. The Bible consistently suggests that your life and mine are used by God for God’s own purposes, that the reason for all this urging us to be steadfast, courageous, strong, loving, and good is because that’s the stuff God uses—even the undramatic, inconsequential stuff—to build a kingdom on earth.

November 11, Veteran’s Day, always reminds me of the quiet, mostly undramatic virtues of loyalty and duty and steadfastness and self-sacrifice of so many individual men and women who have been called into the service of our nation. November 11 always reminds me of uncles and cousins of mine who went off to war and did not come home and the simple, almost innocent, goodness of their sense of duty. I’m reading John Eisenhower’s personal memoir of his father, *General Ike*, in which he describes his father’s uncomplaining willingness to do whatever his nation asked him to do and how ordinary his life often was. I read about a new book, *The Bedford Boys*, who grew up together in Bedford, Virginia, a small town, and how in the first minutes of the D-Day invasion, twenty-two young men from Bedford died. On November 11, I get out Tom Brokaw’s fine book *The Greatest Generation* and read his words that they “won the war and saved the world and came home and rebuilt our country.”

Hold to the good. It reminds me of all the people before me who went about their lives with quiet, undramatic faithfulness, who went to work, paid their bills, took care of their families, never got ahead much, but whose steady commitment, whose hold on the good, is the foundation on which your life and mine rests.

And I can’t help but think of those young men and women in Iraq today—whether you agree or disagree with their being there—who are there, in harm’s way. I read their names every day— seventeen more this morning, who died in a midair collision between two helicopters—ordinary people most of them, doing what we asked them to do, what they had to do, attacked now more than thirty times per day. Staff Sergeant Joseph Bellavia, twenty-eight, “loved people, loved life, loved his country,” killed trying to save his battalion commander, who also died in the attack.

And I can’t help but ponder that larger issues of what now and what the good is, and I conclude, even though I profoundly wish this whole effort

included more of our traditional allies and the United Nations, that the moral and good thing is to stay the course, to be steadfast, not to walk away too quickly. Air Force Academy philosophy professor Martin Cook wrote recently in the *Christian Century,* "Regardless of what one thought about how we got there . . . there are now moral obligations to Iraq and its citizens and the region; that those obligations will not be easy" and that we must leave a "better peace" than before we invaded and occupied the country (*Christian Century,* 1 November 2003).

The late distinguished Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, in a book of essays, observed that "the demands of seemingly ordinary, everyday morality are not so easy after all" and that sometimes keeping on keeping on through "dull, tedious, everyday existence can be more difficult than the singular, heroic moral gesture." God, Rahner said, "is the one we meet, perhaps unconsciously when we love with no guarantees we will be loved in return, when we remain true to our convictions, when we do the good with no certainty that we will be rewarded" (*Meditations on Hope and Love*, pp. 23–26): citizens to their government and civic responsibilities; employees to employer, and employer to employees; parents to children in good times and not-so-good times; and then, as often happens, years later, children to parents; wives to husbands; husbands to wives; partners, friends, men and women—all of us, doing the good, doing God's work, building God's kingdom by quietly doing what we have to do.

William Willimon tells a story from the early days of his ministry as a Methodist pastor. I tell this story with an important qualification. The decision the young couple makes is complex, and their particular decision is not the only right one. I know and respect people who have made the opposite decision.

The way Willimon tells it, he was sitting with a young couple waiting for the pediatrician after their baby was born. The doctor sat down and said, "There are some problems with your baby boy. He's been born with Down's syndrome, and he has a respiratory condition. We could correct it, but I recommend we take him off the respirator and that you consider just letting nature take its course." The doctor explained his reasons: the burden the child would create for them and their other two children, the expense, the heartache.

The couple, without hesitation, said, "No. Don't do that. We want our child." The doctor turned to Willimon: "Pastor, I hope you can help them to get real." Willimon said he wished he had said but didn't, "Doctor, they are real. They are living in a world more real than yours."

Willimon and the doctor were together again on the day the baby was discharged from the hospital. He remembers: "We watched the couple leave

the hospital. They walked slowly carrying a small bundle; but it seemed to us a heavy burden, a weight on their shoulders."

"It will be too much for them," the physician said. "You should have talked them out of it. You should have helped them understand."

Willimon concludes, "But I noticed, as they left, a curious look on their faces, a look as if the burden were not too heavy at all, as if it were light, a privilege, a sign, borne up, as if on another's shoulders, being led toward some higher place the doctor and I would not be going, following a way we would not understand." (*On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, pp. 79–80, and *Christian Century,* 29 August 2001).

"God is the one we meet," the great theologian said, "when we dare to be foolish, when we love without the certainty that we will be loved in return, when we remain true to our convictions." "Just where we are," he said, "living quite ordinarily, carrying on patiently, it is here precisely that we can experience the coming of the kingdom of God."

God uses the ordinary lives of ordinary people, their steadfastness, quiet courage to bring about the kingdom.

That, by the way, is the way it ends for Ruth, too. She lives out her ordinary life with Boaz in Bethlehem. They have a son whose name is Obed, and Obed will marry and have a son whose name is Jesse, and Jesse will marry and have a son whose name is David, and he will become the king. And that means that Ruth, who held to the good so many years ago, was the great-grandmother of David the king and the many times great-grandmother of another child of Bethlehem whose name is Jesus.

So, do hold to the good. You never know what might come of it.

Amen.